

DN disabilitynow

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Court threat

DN EXCLUSIVE BY JOHN PRING

Motability is facing a court battle from disgruntled retailers who claim the new company that will run its hire purchase wheelchair scheme from May could increase costs for disabled people and slash their own profits.

Many firms that sell scooters and powered wheelchairs through the scheme are furious that they will have to buy them from the new organisation, Route2Mobility (R2M).

R2M, owned by The Enabling Partnership (EP) and the Bright Futures Group, is cutting the maximum prices at which retailers can sell the products by about 10 per cent.

But one retailer has set up a fighting fund to call for a judicial review of the financing and levels of service in the scheme, and of the decision to award the five-year contract to R2M.

Eric Dixon, managing director of A1 Mobility in Blackpool, said: "With the industry in the turmoil this is likely to put it in, you are going to see mobility shops closing down all over the place."

More than 30 retailers are backing his fight. Fellow retailer Alan Lambert, who is chairing a British Healthcare Trades Association (BHTA) committee on the dispute, said: "The feeling in the industry is extremely passionate about this."

His committee will decide on a legal challenge in April. He said the changes could reduce choice and service and increase costs for disabled people.

Retailers had not yet been told what interest rates customers would be charged, and he criticised the lack of information from R2M.

But Simon Knighton, commercial director of EP, said: "We are very confident that we

are offering a much better deal to disabled people."

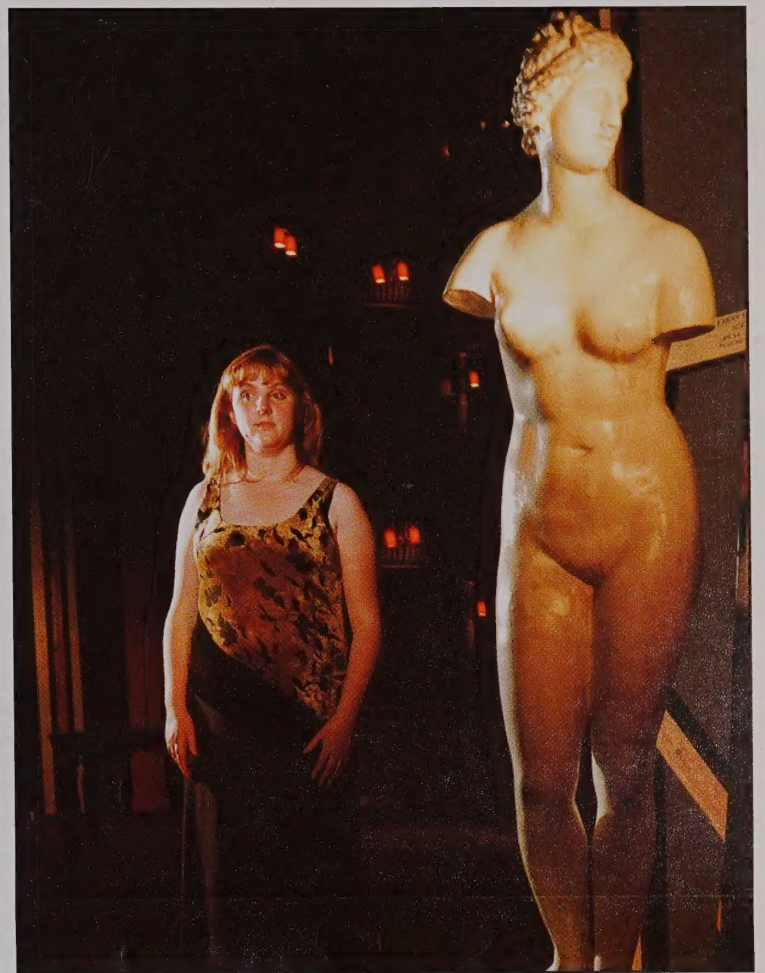
He accepted retailers would face smaller profit margins, but said it was "complete nonsense" that many would be driven out of business.

"Some dealers have been overcharging customers and will find it difficult to do so in the future. For most dealers, Motability is a small part of their business."

Declan O'Mahony, Motability's oversight and strategy director, said he was "not concerned" about a legal challenge because there had been a "very robust tender process".

"The issue of fighting funds and judicial reviews is the sort of noise that will disappear over the next few weeks when the dealers understand exactly what is being proposed," he said.

He added that lower prices would bring dealers more customers.



Operatunity knocks: Denise Leigh, who is visually impaired, sang the role of Gilda in a performance of Verdi's Rigoletto at the London Coliseum, after her joint victory in Channel 4's Operatunity, where contestants competed for the chance to sing in a professional opera.

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BSL: it's now official

British Sign Language (BSL) is to be recognised as an official language in what has been described as a "milestone" in the campaign for equality for deaf people.

The government's announcement last month was heralded as a triumph for deaf people's organisations, which have campaigned for decades to get BSL recognised alongside minority languages such as Welsh.

The government also pledged £1m to raise awareness

of BSL among employers and service providers and increase opportunities to study it professionally.

A panel will examine the implications of BSL's new status in all front-line government services.

Brian Lamb, of the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, said it could "tip the balance" in tribunal decisions about whether provision of interpreting was a 'reasonable adjustment'.

"In situations such as going to a doctor, parents evening, or important job interview, it would become more reasonable than not to provide interpreting."

The National Deaf Children's Society predicted a "revolution" in education, with BSL becoming a GCSE or A-level option.

Chief executive Susan Daniels said: "It will be much harder for LEAs not to make provisions for deaf children to access BSL in educational settings."

Stigma over stress

People with mental health problems and conditions that are made worse by stress could lose their Incapacity Benefit or Severe Disablement Allowance if government plans go ahead, charities have warned.

The proposals scrap a clause exempting people who have been passed fit to work from returning to employment if it

could put their health at risk.

Martin Inch, advice worker for Disability Alliance, said the plans would see the loss of an important failsafe for groups who did not fit into the "rigid requirements" of the assessment.

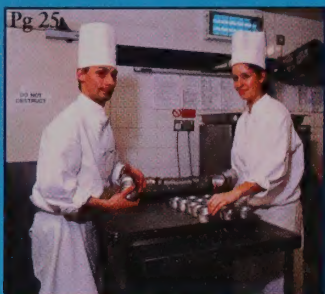
A consultation* is due to end early this month.

* Email: sssc@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or visit www.ssac.org.uk

Former champion boxer
Michael Watson prepares
for the London marathon
12 years after a fight left him
brain damaged. See page 12.
Photo by Nuala Calvi.

Don't miss DN Extra! This month, you'll start to receive our new, mid-month supplement with the latest news – at no extra cost.

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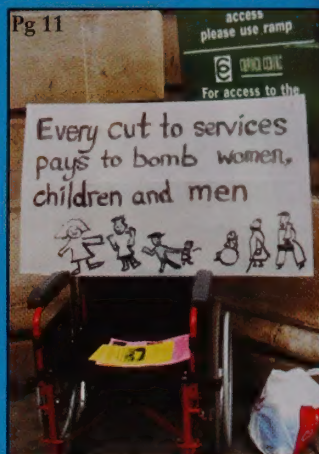
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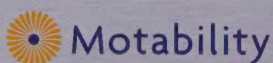
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DN CAMPAIGN



Drugs on the way

The first cannabis-based drugs should be available in the UK this year, researchers say.

GW Pharmaceuticals (GWP) is set to deliver to the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) "within weeks" a dossier of results from trials of a drug to help symptoms of multiple sclerosis.

If the MCA licences the drug, as expected, the government promises to amend the law to allow it to be legally prescribed.

Mark Rogerson, a GWP spokesman, said: "We have been in close contact with the MCA throughout the trial process. We

believe we are going to put in a robust dossier to them.

"It seems reasonable to hope that we would have a medicine available on prescription in the UK by the end of this year.

If the drug is licensed, applications for medicines for other conditions, such as cancer pain and spinal cord injury, will probably be submitted by GWP to the MCA next year.

Meanwhile, the Cannabinoids in Multiple Sclerosis Trial in Plymouth expects to publish results from a study of two cannabis-based drugs in July.

Parliamentary warning

Members of the British Council of Disabled People (BCODP) have warned that its disabled people's parliament could become a "watered-down" voice of the disability movement.

BCODP received European Year of Disabled People funding to run a "pilot" parliament for one year.

A committee of members meets this month to plan elections in late summer, which have been delayed by two months.

Mike Higgins, a committee member and head of the Manchester Coalition of Disabled People, said: "The worst scenario is it waters

down the stance taken by the movement and becomes a way through which unrepresentative groups influence the 'voice' of disabled people."

Alun Davies, of the West of England Coalition of Disabled People, said: "The bigger an organisation gets, the more diluted the views get. If the parliament achieves credibility, there's the danger it will become the only body people listen to and give money to."

Committee member Simone Aspis added: "BCODP was set up within the framework of the social model and that's crucial.

"But people will be voted

onto the parliament without any working framework or ethos."

BCODP chief executive Andy Rickell said the concerns were valid. "The parliament will have to have a clear, strong message, otherwise it's not going to make any difference," he said. "If it doesn't improve campaigning, that will be taken into account in the decision over its future."

• The new National Centre for Independent Living (NCIL) was due to be launched on 1 April, six months after BCODP members voted to make it independent. The vote followed tensions between NCIL and BCODP over campaigning.

U-turn on inclusion

Campaigners have accused the government of breaking its promise to cut the use of special schools for disabled children.

A new report by the Department for Education and Skills* says the government "strongly supports special schools and wants to secure their long term future."

It comes after a 1998 "action plan" promised to channel funds into mainstream schools.

Richard Reiser, director of Disability Equality in Education, said: "This is not about the abilities of children but about whether there is the political will to create inclusive education.

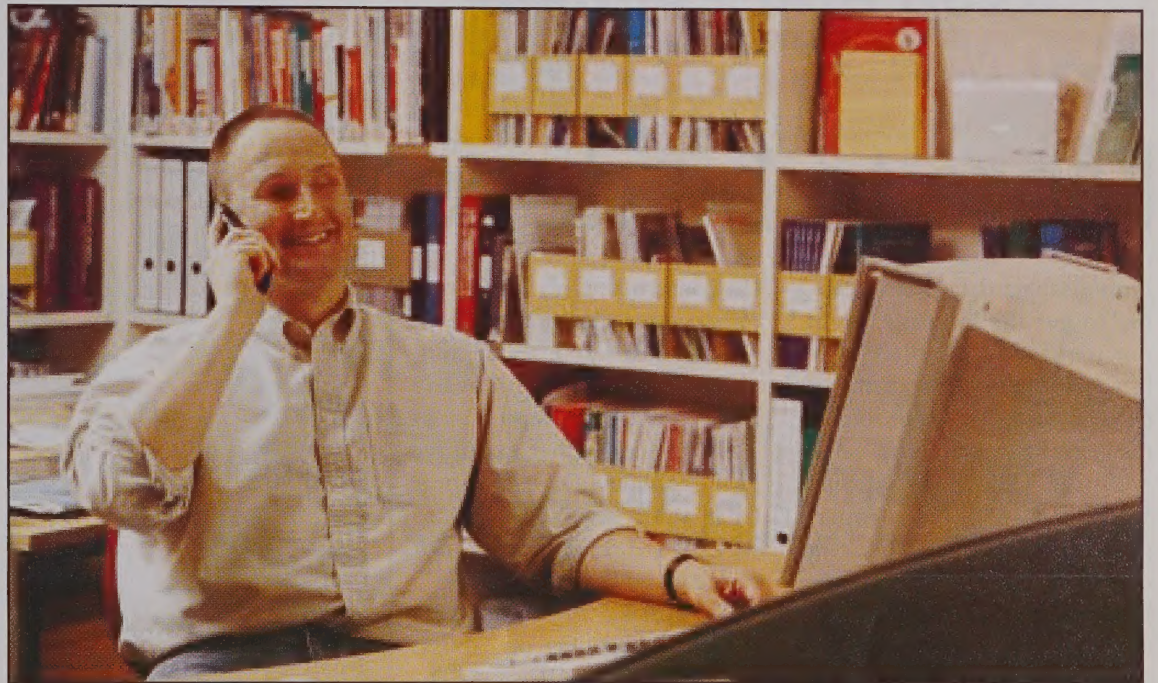
"Children in special schools achieve three to 10 times worse GCSE results and their life chances are much lower."

The Alliance for Inclusive Education said the new report, if implemented, would stop the development of inclusion by slowing down the flow of funds into the mainstream.

The DfES said the government's agenda had not changed and that parents needed to be able to choose special schools.

It said funding for inclusion in mainstream schools had risen sharply over recent years.

* website: www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations2/04/



Call me: Mark Threadgold tests a new mobile phone with speech access at a meeting of the computer club of St Dunstan's, a charity for blind ex-servicemen. Members were given a demonstration of the phone, which allows a blind person to use facilities such as the diary and email.

DN CAMPAIGN



Code call

A new government code of practice for air travel includes measures to prevent damage to wheelchairs during flights.

The voluntary code* calls for baggage handlers to receive training in handling wheelchairs, which should be kept in protective wrapping, loaded last and carried free.

The code also lists standards in areas such as information systems, aircraft and airport design, and staff training.

The government and the Disability Rights Commission will monitor the air industry over the next two years, with the threat of new laws if the standards are not upheld.

The Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee issued a guide for disabled passengers to go with the code**

*Access to Air Travel for Disabled People, available at www.dft.gov.uk

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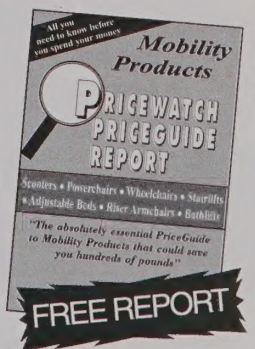
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MOBILITY MATTERS NETWORK

Europe leads the way

Proposed new Europe-wide disability discrimination laws would be an "indispensable" step towards freedom of movement throughout the continent for disabled people, according to campaigners.

The European Disability Forum (EDF), a disability umbrella organisation, has taken two years to draw up the "shadow" directive.

If adopted by the European Union (EU), the directive would establish full disability rights in all aspects of daily life, including many areas not currently covered by UK law.

It would outlaw discrimination in social security and the design of manufactured goods, offer protection against discrimination in public appointments, remove the upper limit for compensation claims and offer protection to relatives of disabled people.

The EDF hopes to persuade the European Commission to commit to the proposal by the end of the European Year of Disabled People 2003.

A Disability Rights Commission spokesman said: "Such a directive is an indispensable requirement for

enabling disabled citizens in the EU to achieve freedom of movement and equal participation."

A Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) spokeswoman said it was "very strongly in favour" of the directive, but UK government backing was crucial.

Meanwhile, the RNIB welcomed new regulations to make it clear that people who are certified as blind or partially sighted are deemed disabled under the Disability Discrimination Act.

In the past, blind people have had difficulty proving they meet the act's definition of disability.

DN CAMPAIGN



Charity signs on

A children's charity has joined DN's campaign to extend winter fuel payments to severely disabled people, after its research showed that over half of UK families with a disabled child live, or have lived, in poverty.

Barnardo's is now calling for a review of housing policy and wants winter fuel payments extended to all families receiving Disability Living Allowance middle or higher-rate care component or higher-rate mobility component.

The report* also calls for a simplified benefits system and for extra financial help to meet the costs of bringing up a disabled child.

Barnardo's chief executive Roger Singleton said: "Most poor families do not have a disabled child; but tragically, many families with a disabled child do live in poverty. We challenge the government to take urgent and sustained action."

*Still Missing Out?, £5 plus postage. Tel: 01268 520224.

DN CAMPAIGN



More to be done

Non-disabled drivers are starting to get the message about not parking in disabled bays, but more must be done to change attitudes, according to the latest Baywatch research*.

Of the 935 ASDA, Safeway, Sainsbury's and Tesco supermarkets surveyed, 18.5 per cent of disabled parking bays were being used by a vehicle without a badge. Last year, non-disabled drivers occupied nearly a quarter of disabled bays.

But the survey also showed that supermarket staff seemed

less concerned. Only 32 per cent of supermarkets gave excellent, good or fair responses to complaints, compared with nearly 70 per cent last year.

Ed Passant, chief executive of the Disabled Drivers' Motor Club, said: "Everybody has to work harder as we are not changing public attitudes."

Passant said supermarkets have to be tougher on abuse. But he welcomed an ASDA campaign to shame drivers who abuse disabled bays.

*www.disabilitynow.org.uk



Signing up: The Office star Julie Fernandez at the launch of a Disability Rights Commission (DRC) advertising campaign to highlight discrimination in education. The DRC also launched a free schools Citizenship Pack. Tel: 08457 622 633, fax: 08457 778 878, or email: enquiry@drc-gb.org

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In October 2004, Part 3 of the Disability Discrimination Act comes into force which means that your organisation's premises, facilities and services will have to be accessible to disabled people.

But if the idea of meeting this challenge is giving you sleepless nights, don't despair! Informative and friendly help is available from Access Made Easy (AME).

AME is a disability consultancy which was set up in January 2000 to undertake Access to Work assessments for Jobcentreplus and to provide disability awareness training to the public, private and voluntary sectors. The company's 2 founding partners, Andy Taylor and Tom O'Sullivan are both visually impaired and between them, have notched up over 20 years' experience of working on the frontline with disabled clients.

Whatever your concerns are over complying with the DDA - whether it's employment or making your services and premises accessible - Andy and Tom will be able to offer your organisation constructive and practical advice.

Access Made Easy understands the anxiety that new legislation like the DDA can cause, so to allay your fears, AME is offering Disability Awareness Training Courses at very competitive rates. Andy Taylor and Tom O'Sullivan will lead the sessions which will last either a full or half day and their aim is to provide you with a full understanding of your obligations under the Act and to give you workable solutions.

Other services available from AME include Information Technology/Access Technology training, Audio & Braille Transcription and Employment Assessments.

To find out more, please phone either Andy or Tom on 0208 507 8841 or alternatively, visit the Access Made Easy website at www.accessmadeeasy.co.uk

In brief

Glynn Vernon

A memorial service for disability rights campaigner Glynn Vernon will be held in north London on Thursday, 3 April.

The service is at 1pm at St Mary's Church, Upper Street, Islington, followed by a reception at St Mary's Neighbourhood Centre, Upper Street.

To attend, contact Sarah Woodward, tel/fax: 01494 565164 or email sarah.woodward@btinternet.com

DRC wants you

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) wants to hear from people* who have been charged to use a wheelchair at British airports when flying with Ryanair.

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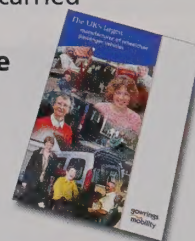
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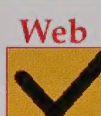
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Build it: Deafblind Debbie Roberts and Steven Bottoms (right), who make furniture at Sense's garden room in Birmingham, welcomed £10,000 from the Wesleyan Charitable Trust's Ian Farquharson.

BSL consultation farce

Major disability organisations have been accused of excluding the deaf community from consultation on a new guide about British Sign Language (BSL) interpreting.

The draft document, by the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), the British Deaf Association and the Disability Rights

Commission, advises employers and service providers about making adjustments for BSL users, but is not available itself in BSL.

Sign language interpreter Elvire Roberts said the guidance was "extremely difficult" to access for anyone with BSL as their first language.

She said: "This cannot be a

genuine consultation."

The Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI) questioned how balanced the consultation could be if it excluded people who use interpreters.

The RNID said the guidance was aimed at service providers but BSL users could make comments via video phone.

Advisers' aversion

Jobcentre Plus advisers find it difficult to raise the subject of work with sick and disabled customers, says a new government report by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Advisors have a perception that such customers "would not be interested in work" and are failing to raise the subject through a desire to be "sensitive to their needs", according to an evaluation of the first six months of Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices.

Customers other than those claiming Jobseekers Allowance were mostly being told to come back when they felt ready to look for work and were not added to a case load, it found.

Philippa Simkiss, employment expert at the Royal National Institute of the Blind, questioned how Jobcentre Plus advisors could encourage disabled people to take up opportunities if they were unaware of them themselves.

She said: "An internal marketing exercise needs to be done with their staff about the range of jobs disabled people can succeed in with the right support."

In brief

Mental health plan

A new government project aims to reduce the social exclusion experienced by people with mental health problems.

Mental health charity MACA welcomed the project but said it was "bizarre" that the government regarded its proposed mental health bill as helpful in tackling social exclusion.

Correction

Due to a production error, an incorrect telephone number was printed in last month's news focus on medical assessments.

The number to call for copies of Dial UK's *A Bitter Pill* report is 01302 310123.



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Spread your wings: Phil Eckett, who has recovered from a stress-related illness, shows off his skills as an owl entertainer, a business he set up with help from the Essex based training and employment firm Seetec. A new Seetec campaign, "What's Stopping You?", describes how it helps people on disability benefits who want to develop skills and return to work. Tel: 01702 201 070 or email jeremy.nutter@seetec.co.uk

Rules to hit fast buck traders

A leading industry body is developing a code of practice aimed at stopping the mis-selling of assistive products to disabled and older people.

The industry has been hit by a string of critical reports over the last year (*DN* January), accusing some firms of employing high pressure sales techniques.

The British Healthcare Trades Association (BHTA) will present a draft code of practice at a conference in London later this year. It will eventually be submitted for approval to the Office of Fair Trading (OFT), which is investigating "doorstep selling".

The BHTA hopes the code will head off OFT threats that its investigation could lead to new government regulation.

Ray Hodgkinson, BHTA director general, said: "The industry currently attracts a lot of unsuitable people hoping to make a fast buck, and we must put a stop to this."

"It is time to improve our standards, and hopefully this new code of practice will provide the muscle needed to stop vulnerable people being cheated out of their money and out of the right product to give them quality of life."

Maggie Winchcombe, acting chief executive of the Disabled Living Centres Council, said she welcomed the new code. She added: "It puts out good signals for consumers that those within the industry are aware of the difficulties and are working hard to address them."

Post Office ATMs are still unusable

Changes to the Post Office's controversial new cash machines will still leave tens of thousands of disabled people out in the cold, according to campaigners.

The Post Office (PO) has told *DN* that it is placing "key guards" on the machines' PIN pads, among short term measures to make them more accessible, while it examines longer-term solutions.

The PO's decision to act followed complaints from disability groups that many disabled people would find the ATMs difficult to use (*DN*, March).

But the Royal National Institute of the Blind said the new guards were unlikely to help people with sight problems.

And the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) said the pads would still be inaccessible

to many learning disabled people and those with prosthetic limbs. DRC chair Bert Massie is to meet PO executives to discuss the latest problems.

A DRC spokesman said: "We welcome the interim measures but it will not help all disabled people. We want greater involvement of disabled people in the consultation and more testing."

"It would have been better if there had been broader consultation earlier."

A PO spokeswoman said: "We are not trying to discriminate against anybody. We want to work with these groups to improve things."

The new machines are being introduced because the government is gradually replacing giro cheques and benefit books with direct payments into bank or new PO card accounts.

BBC slammed for 'thoughtless' jokes

Disability activists have attacked the BBC for allowing stars to tell offensive jokes targeting disabled people on prime-time television.

Two of the best-known offenders have included chat-show hosts Jonathan Ross and Johnny Vaughan.

In February, the BBC refused to uphold a complaint relating to a "joke" made by Ross about amputee Heather McCartney-Mills, in an episode of the comedy quiz *They Think It's All Over*.

It came months after Johnny Vaughan was forced to apologise for pressing guest Will Self to make offensive remarks about people of restricted growth.

In the wake of the show, angry restricted growth campaigners contacted Liberal Democrat MP Patsy Calton, and attended a meeting with her.

Calton put down an early day motion, calling for an end to the "constant media barrage of thoughtless discrimination, comment and misplaced jokes" about people of restricted growth. So far, more than 80 MPs have signed it.

April Barrett, spokeswoman for the Dwarf Athletic Association of the UK (DAA), said: "We were bombarded with complaints from our members. We have to ensure this sort of thing stops happening in the media."

A BBC spokeswoman said it "never set out to offend or upset people".

But Andy Rickell, chief executive of the British Council of Disabled People, said such humour was "not acceptable".

He added: "Only disabled people have the right to joke about their condition."

In brief

High fat hope

Initial results of a study at Great Ormond Street Hospital show a high fat diet can reduce seizures in children with severe epilepsy.

Fifty children with drug-resistant epilepsy are taking part in the nutrition trial.

Info for parents

The Ear Foundation* (EF) has received a £50,000 government grant to provide better information for parents of newborn babies diagnosed with hearing impairments.

The grant is funding a free video and booklet and improvements to its website.

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No right to die

DN EXCLUSIVE BY JOHN PRING

The Disability Rights Commission is set to oppose the introduction of laws allowing disabled people a "right to die".

The commission (DRC) will not announce its official position until the summer, but Jill Stewart, DRC policy manager for independent living, health and social care, told DN: "At the moment, we are not convinced that safeguards and regulations can be put in place to protect disabled people."

She said research carried out in the Netherlands – which has an assisted suicide law – showed that one in five such deaths in 1999 were carried out without the patient's consent.

"It is against this backdrop that at the moment we just could not support a change in

legislation," she said.

She added that the DRC also had concerns about a new private member's bill introduced by Lord Joffe in the House of Lords.

His Patient Assisted Dying Bill, which came in the wake of several recent cases of people with motor neurone disease who demanded a "right to die", would allow a terminally ill adult to request medical assistance to end their lives.

Meanwhile, the High Court has ruled that a hospital was wrong to say it would not give life-saving medical treatment to an 18-year-old autistic man with kidney failure because of his learning and behavioural problems.

Stewart said: "It is just incredible that these sort of things are still going on. It is completely unacceptable."

£1.4bn housing boost

A new £1.4 billion scheme should improve housing for tens of thousands of disabled and older people.

The government's Supporting People programme, launched this month with £1.4 billion funding in its first year, aims to prevent crises such as homelessness or hospitalisation by providing people with early housing-related support.

Local authorities will spend the money, transferred from

existing grants, in partnership with housing, social, health and probation services.

It could be used, for example, to help disabled people adjust to more independent living after leaving a residential home.

The learning disability charity Mencap welcomed the scheme. But David Congdon, its director of public affairs, said: "It will not be a substitute for a big increase in social services community care budgets."



Cottoned on: In the first case to be taken by the Disability Rights Commission under new education discrimination laws, Louie Valencia, six, and his family are taking his London school, to a tribunal for telling him to wear regulation trousers that inflamed his eczema.

Targets missed

The number of disabled people employed by the Civil Service has fallen again, months after the government admitted numbers had plunged by 2,000 in three years.

New Cabinet Office statistics show disabled staff made up about 3.6 per cent of the 500,000-strong workforce in October 2002, a drop of 0.1 per cent since October 2001.

And the percentage of senior staff who described themselves as disabled dropped from 1.8 to 1.7 per cent, against a target of 3 per cent by 2005.

A Cabinet Office (CO) spokeswoman said they were looking to "reinvigorate" their disability plan, after discussions

with several organisations.

"We are concerned about the lack of progress being made against the disability target and we are prioritising action to accelerate progress."

The CO set up a working group in January to look at how best to monitor disability. Other measures include refocusing the bursary scheme for disabled staff onto those with potential to reach senior positions.

Phil Madelin, disabilities officer for the Public and Commercial Services Union, which works with the CO, said: "There is still a lot of work for the Civil Service to do, both in terms of recruitment and retention."

News review

A round-up of news in the mainstream media from the last few weeks

Mental health win

The High Court ruled that people detained under the Mental Health Act are entitled to compensation if there are delays in reviewing their cases.

A judge awarded damages of between £750 and £4,000 to six patients who had been detained in hospital for up to 27 weeks longer than was necessary because of a shortage of panel members on Mental Health Review Tribunals.

Mental health charity Mind welcomed the ruling, saying reviews were routinely postponed and wreaked havoc with people's recovery.

Haemophilia boost

The Haemophilia Society welcomed the government's announcement of £88 million over the next three years to give recombinant genetically engineered treatment to adults in England.

Synthetic recombinant is given in place of plasma-derived products and is the safest form of treatment for people with haemophilia.

The move follows five years' of campaigning by the society.

Action plan attacked

Charities attacked a government epilepsy action plan, saying it will not reduce the number of deaths from epilepsy.

The government announced a £1.2m investment in epilepsy services over the next two years.

But Epilepsy Action and Epilepsy Bereaved said it would have little impact. They said there was not enough money, no targets and no monitoring of progress.

NHS could owe millions

Campaigners said the National Health Service could owe millions of pounds to older people with disabilities, after the publication of a report by the Health Service Ombudsman.

The report showed that four older people with long-term disabilities had been forced to pay for long-term nursing care that they should have received free.



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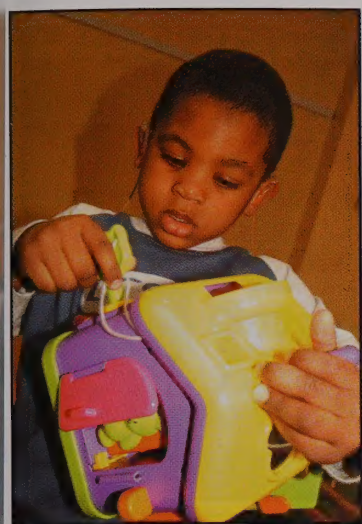
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Fun and games: Leon Walker Dobson enjoys activities at a National Deaf Children's Society parenting day. The next day is on 5 April in Birmingham. Info: 020 7490 8656.

Job axe

The UK's largest charity for deaf people is to make up to 20 staff redundant because of financial problems caused by the downturn in the economy.

The Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) is axing jobs in a bid to cut expenditure by £1.2m to cover the shortfall created by a drop in its legacy income of more than £1m.

The charity said services for deaf people will not be affected by the cuts. RNID chief executive John Low said: "We need to act now to reduce our planned 2003/2004 expenditure by £1.2m if we are to safeguard the ongoing financial viability of RNID."

The RNID is the latest disability charity to announce cuts because of the stock market fall. The Royal National Institute of the Blind has already axed 100 jobs (DN January).

DRC bid

The Disability Rights Commission has called for a planned single equalities commission to be modelled on a "federal" system to ensure separate units are kept for tackling different types of discrimination.

The proposals would see different units, for example those dealing with race and disability, come together to share services like finance or human resources or to tackle issues of multiple discrimination.

It warns that unless priority is given to tackling different strands of discrimination, the single body could follow the fate of similar schemes abroad which have seen expertise in disability issues lost.

Last month, the Trades Union Congress joined calls for a single equality act to give all groups uniform rights before a single commission was set up.

It said a government select committee would need to track progress on equality issues.

Landmark ruling on lifting ban

A "landmark" High Court ruling should stop local authorities from banning workers from manually lifting disabled people who need home care.

The court found that East Sussex County Council should not have imposed a total ban on manual handling, and that councils should strike a balance between the rights of both dis-

abled people and care workers.

The Disability Rights Commission said the "landmark" ruling should help "thousands of disabled people who have been denied their most basic human rights".

The case was brought by the parents of two profoundly disabled women, who cannot be named for legal reasons.

But despite the ruling in February, the family are still not receiving any help in their home.

The council found them a care provider, but the family say this company will not allow its carers to do manual lifting. They say they may have to return to court to force the council to comply with the ruling.

The women's father told DN: "The ruling will help a lot of people, but the fight is still going on. It hasn't given us anything yet."

A council spokeswoman said: "We are working with the family and their representatives and complying with the court order. This is an ongoing and complex issue."


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Camden cuts spark protest

Disabled women in Camden, north London, staged a 14-hour protest (see right) outside their town hall in February against £2m cuts to social services.

Campaigners are furious at Camden Council's plans to end home care services for disabled people classed as "low need".

From 2004, a new system of assessment is likely to see hundreds of people deprived of

help with basic activities like shopping, cleaning and getting to appointments.

Claire Glasman, of disabled women's group WinVisible, told DN: "For a lot of the older women here, it's precisely because they don't have family around that they are relying on social services."

Andrew Warren, one of more than 100 people who

joined the vigil, said: "Our local councils are making cuts and meanwhile the government has £3.5bn for war with Iraq."

Camden Council said it had to decide the threshold above which services would be provided. It said any needs assessed as "low" would no longer be met, but people would get "advice and help to find other ways to meet these needs".



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Ramp rut

A bank has been told it must pay £6,000 a year in rent to Portsmouth City Council to put up a wheelchair ramp.

Disabled people have waited six years for the ramp to appear at Barclays Bank in Commercial Road, Portsmouth, after planning permission was approved.

Barclays put the plans on hold after being told it would have to pay rent because the ramp would extend into a shopping precinct. The feud has gone on so long that planning permission has now expired and campaigners are worried the adjustments will never be made.

Disabled campaigner Clive Garnett, who collected 1,500 signatures for a petition calling for access to the bank, said it was "terrible" that wheelchair users were still forced to discuss their private business in all weathers outside on the pavement.

He said: "They've had planning permission since 1997. The council should be encouraging businesses to make places accessible, not putting them off."

A spokesman for Barclays said it had refused to pay for the ramp because it believed a precedent could be set for councils to charge other businesses to put up wheelchair ramps. He said: "Portsmouth is the only council in the country to ask for this."

Portsmouth council said the charge was negotiable, but that Barclays had not replied with a "reasonable" offer.

Access call

The Greater London Assembly (GLA) has launched a new initiative to improve deaf access to vital services in the capital.

The Royal National Institute for Deaf People is working with GLA agencies on several projects, from overhauling Transport for London's public announcement system to installing video phones at police stations.

A video, *London: Access to the Capital*, explains how to access services in London. For copies, call 0808 808 0123, textphone: 0808 808 9000 or email: informationline@rnid.org.uk

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Treatment trouble

Less than five per cent of people with motor neurone disease (MND) are given basic treatment that could improve their survival rates and quality of life, according to new research.

People with MND often need assisted breathing devices called Non Invasive Positive Pressure Ventilation (NIPPV) to obtain enough oxygen intake at night.

But until now there hasn't been any research into the effectiveness of the treatment and only a small number of people with MND receive it.

The MND Association (MNDA) is now funding research. Initial results show that an assisted breathing device is the most effective treatment currently available.

An MNDA spokesman said: "If you have one of these machines, you live longer. People who use NIPPV have a better quality of life because they sleep better."

"There must be a large number of people who could benefit who are not being offered it."

The research will be published later this year.



New chapter: service user Penny Johnson (right) with Baroness Lockwood, deputy speaker of the House of Lords, at the opening of Low Moor Resource Centre in Bradford. Designed for severely learning disabled people, it includes multi-sensory rooms and independent living areas and has both health and social care staff.

Faltering funding

A lack of funds threatens the government's initiative to provide drugs for people with multiple sclerosis, MS charities have said.

The government set up its risk-sharing scheme after the National Institute for Clinical Excellence said that beta interferon and glatiramer acetate were not cost effective.

The initiative lets people with MS take the drugs while research continues. If the drugs prove to be less effective than predicted, the price will be reduced.

The MS Trust and the MS Society say that lack of funds and specialist staff could mean that patients will wait too long for treatment.

A Department of Health spokeswoman dismissed the claim and said: "At the end of the day, we are trying our best for patients. The scheme has the full backing of the Association of British Neurologists and the MS Society."

Access lacking

All health care staff should have compulsory disability training, because their attitudes and lack of communication skills are barring disabled people from basic health care, says a disability charity.

The new report* by Leonard Cheshire shows over 20 per cent of people have difficulty using accident and emergency departments, more than a third of wheelchair users have problems accessing a dentist, and nearly two-thirds of profoundly deaf people find doctors inaccessible.

Despite these figures, only 20 per cent of primary care trusts see communication as a priority and less than nine per cent see staff attitudes as a concern.

John Knight, head of external policy at Leonard Cheshire, said: "Access for disabled people goes much wider than ramps or lifts. Ultimately, do health practitioners put the same value on a disabled person's life as somebody who hasn't got a disability?"

A Department of Health (DOH) spokeswoman said the NHS Plan committed it to "ensuring that public services are equitable and accessible".

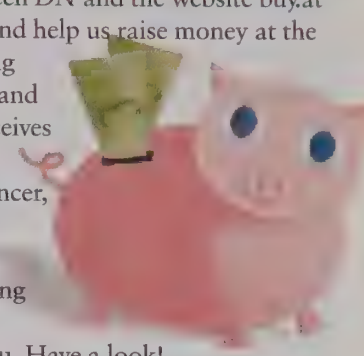
She said the DOH met with the Disability Rights Commission in January to develop a programme of improvements.

* *Fair Treatment, free from Leonard Cheshire*, tel: 020 7802 8204, email: j.campion@london.leonard-cheshire.org.uk

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Sporting champ

Michael Watson has been out of the ring for 12 years, but he's still a fighter. He talks to Nuala Calvi about his latest challenge – the London Marathon

Nearly 12 years after their infamous fight left him severely brain damaged and close to death, Michael Watson plans to come face-to-face once more with opponent Chris Eubank.

This time, however, no punches will be thrown. The former middleweight world champion, who came back from a 40-day coma to learn to speak, read and walk again, is to amaze doctors and fans anew by taking part in the London Marathon. Eubank may even join him for the finishing straight.

Now aged 37, Watson will take six days to complete the 26

and dizzy spells. Treatment still takes up half of his day.

Nevertheless, Watson has embarked on an ambitious training regime for the marathon, which involves gym workouts, swimming and walking. Rather than being daunted by the prospect, it is clear that he thrives on such challenges.

"The way I stay positive is to have a goal, which is to keep moving on, keep progressing. My time for full healing will come. Like everything in life, you take out what you put in."

Watson hopes his odyssey will instill this attitude in other people who have experienced brain and spine injury.

how his words of wisdom will affect those disabled people who are not going to "overcome" their disability.

"It's about trying day to day to the best of their ability. We all have limitations. If I get to a stage in my recovery where I can't get any further, I will accept that."

Watson's own relationship with his disability has been complex. Being a champion boxer has, he says, made it more difficult to come to terms with being disabled.

"It's been hard, terribly hard. I like to be in control of my life but now I need 24-hour care. I can't walk down the road to the shops on my own."

"Sometimes I feel I want to break down and cry, but in my profession you're taught not to show emotions. Often I wish I could, but it's easier said than done when you've been such a hard man all your life."

Yet he also regards the injury as something of an epiphany.

"I feel a lot more content, more balanced mentally. Spiritually, I've become a better man. I'm more relaxed because now I haven't got to worry about things like 'I've got to get the next Rolls Royce'. I realise how precious life is."



Fight to the finish: Watson gets ready for the big event

'Helping someone is a far bigger buzz than being a champion boxer ever was'

miles, at walking pace, in two-and-a-half mile chunks. It might sound leisurely, but watching him cross the room on the arm of carer Lenny, I realise what an enormous challenge it will be.

It took Watson six years to get out of his wheelchair and walk again. He now walks everywhere, but still has some trouble moving and speaking, and experiences forgetfulness

"It's to inspire people who are in the same position not to give up hope, to show them that where there's a will there's a way, that they can overcome their disability if they have faith."

For Watson, that faith is most definitely a religious one, which has always been with him but which was strengthened by his injury. His recovery, he says, is an example of the potential of faith to move mountains. I wonder

"Before, I was a lot more materialistic. I had different priorities. Life was so fast-moving that I didn't have time for other people."

These days, other people have become the main priority. For the last decade, Watson has been doing motivational work in schools and rehabilitation centres and has campaigned for the Brain and Spine Foundation, the charity he will be raising money for through the marathon.

"My charity work is my main focus. I go to visit people who have no one, and it gives them hope. Helping someone is a far bigger buzz than being a champion boxer ever was."

The boxing world is one which Watson has found himself distanced from since his injury. Most of his friends, he says, disappeared when he became disabled. He still has a love for the sport, but says he would now never want to box again.

But he feels his injury left its mark on boxing as much as on him. "When it happened, the whole sports world was affected, and some people don't watch boxing any more because of it. Eubank's never been the same since that fight; he's a lot more emotional."

"But there's been a purpose. It's made people wake up to the reality of boxing, and to the fact we have to put proper safety measures in place."

The marathon will mark a very public return to that sporting world which Watson has been out of for so long. But as he sees it, he has never stopped being an athlete.

"It's just that now I'm part of the system once more. I've progressed so much that I've been accepted again."

To sponsor Michael Watson, call the Brain and Spine Foundation credit card hotline on 0870 0600729, visit www.justgiving.com/michaelwatson or send a cheque payable to Brain and Spine Foundation to Michael Watson's Marathon Challenge, Freepost LON10492, London SW9 6BR.



The European Year of Disabled People

To mark European Year of Disabled People, RADAR is running a year long Mentoring Scheme with UnumProvident to pair young disabled people between 15 and 30 years old with business leaders and managers from the corporate sector.

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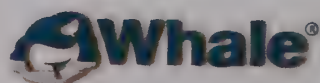
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Hanging around: Agnes upside down on the Teeter Hang Up F9000 Inversion Table from Fitness Network

How green

Kitchen designer Adam Thomas and Agnes Fletcher check out this year's eco-friendly Ideal Home Show

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Over at the Show Homes we were introduced to the extraordinary new material, extrudawood. It is produced by recycling polystyrene waste to look and feel like wood and is used for garden decking, windows, doors, conservatories and cladding.

The appropriately named Geoff House, managing director of Extrudawood International, told us: "We can formulate an almost infinite range of colours and graining effects and we have engineered

the product so that it has greater strength than wood. We can include flame-retardants and UV protection so the colour doesn't fade." Maintenance free, with no need for painting or varnishing, has to be a good thing when your mobility is limited. No logging or preservatives is good news for the environment too. Extrudawood International, tel: 01983 527575

We checked out some genuine greenery in the gardening section and found an ingenious device that raises and lowers hanging baskets to ease

opportunity to stock up on all sorts of green stuff if you're into alternative remedies. For example, Forever Living does aloe vera juice with glucosamine sulphate, taken by many people with arthritis. Tel: 020 8875 9915 or see www.aloeveracentre.com

Alongside all those natural products is plenty of cutting-edge technology to make you green with envy. We road tested the Tempur mattress, which was developed using NASA technology. My wife, Agnes, has scoliosis and arthritis and doesn't sleep well and a friend,

'There are new inventions that you never realised you needed until you see them, such as Toasta Bags, which toast sandwiches and scramble eggs in your toaster'

watering. By reaching underneath the basket, you can release it on a pulley system – saving you from lifting the watering can and having water running down your arm! £5.99 at the show or from Darlac Products, tel: 01753 547790 or see www.darlac.com

The Show is a good

also someone with scoliosis, recommends Tempur. They are pricey (from £459 for a single, excluding VAT – but remember you may be exempt). Still, 30 seconds cocooned in the spongy stuff and Agnes looked ecstatic.

Tel: 0800 616135 or see www.tempur.co.uk

The *Designs of the Future* section shows the work of young design students. This year, we particularly liked the Hug Rug; the internet chopping board, which displays recipes from the internet, and the rather more vulgar internet toilet roll browser! And there are those new inventions that you never realised you needed until you see them, such as Toasta Bags, which toast sandwiches and scramble eggs in your toaster, and the Cyber Rider, an exercise bike hooked up to a Playstation. However, given my wife's tone deafness and habit of breaking into song on long car journeys, the Roland DisCover5 could be the thing: a keyboard that makes you sound like your favourite singer at the touch of a button.

A mainstream product that has genuine safety and access features for disabled people is the Neff B1881 oven with a slide-away door, highlighted in DN March. It won the Good Housekeeping Product Innovation Award for 2002. You can get up close to the oven without reaching over a hot door. I know I'll be using a lot of them in future designs.

Disability Rights Commission Potential Ryanair Class Action

The DRC may be starting a "class action" against Ryanair. This concerns a charge made to travellers who hire wheelchairs at airports.

If you have travelled with Ryanair since 1 October 1999 and were charged for wheelchair hire and you would like to find out more you can:

- fill in the on-line questionnaire (www.drc-gb.org)

- contact the DRC by:

Email ryanair.glo@drc-gb.org

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is my home

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The BT Home of Possibilities had a Home Monitoring service that uses the internet to alert you to break-ins and emergencies via phone, text message or email for a modest £5 per month. It also has a Home Network 1200 service to link up to ten computers and game consoles and control when and for how long children can access the internet, with no new wiring needed.

BT had competition from TecHaus, who market themselves as offering "the ultimate in home control". The company does a home control system managing security, lighting, heating, home appliances and home

entertainment. Prices start from £500 for lighting control. As technology develops, the possibilities for disabled people controlling their environment increase – we just need to wait for everyone else to want these things so the prices come down. Tel: 01844 350202

Despite all the high-minded greenness, marketing at the show is aggressive and a bit overwhelming. Everything is the MFI this and the Direct Line that. There are a few "experts" that you may vaguely have heard of, like celebrity chef Anthony Worrall Thompson pulling in the punters at the Sizzling Kitchen, but the majority are in the league of "Paul Darby from Big

Brother offering expert advice on Feng Shui".

Still, the Ideal Home Show remains a fun day out if you like loads of freebies and enjoy browsing, buying and a bit of bartering in the UK's biggest equivalent to a Middle Eastern bazaar.

And if you're a technophobe, you can ignore all the high-tech gadgetry safe in the knowledge that the most common purchase for men and women is the Sweepa mop. Adam Thomas works for Design Matters in Buckinghamshire, tel: 01628 531584

- From 13 March to 6 April at Earls Court, London.
- Tickets: Adults, £11 weekdays, £13 weekends. Concessions: £7.50 weekdays; £8.50 weekends.
- Earls Court provides a leaflet for disabled visitors, tel: 0207 370 8388.
- To pre-book car parking using Visa, Mastercard or Eurocard, tel: 0800 056 8444.



Home comforts: (Clockwise from left to right) Agnes takes time out on the beanbags, (tel. 08700 131438 or see www.sofabeanbag.co.uk) and dons a wig from SMG International, tel. 0131 448 0505. Finally, Adam hits a bump while getting down from the Tempur stand (right). Nice product (below), but shame about the access.



Green finger: Adam keeps his arms dry with this plant-watering device from Darlac

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'Excluded because of prejudice'

A decision has finally been made about learning disabled athletes at the Paralympics – and Tanni Grey-Thompson is disappointed

It appears that the long and painful process of deciding whether athletes with learning disabilities (LD) will be eligible to compete in the Paralympic Games in Athens has finally ended – and not with a happy conclusion for anyone concerned.

It has been decided that the classification procedure that is used to group athletes, or

integration happened in 1996, with more integrated events being held in Sydney in 2000.

At the time, many athletes were outspoken about the way the Paralympic movement was developing, but the debate became messy and complicated. Instead of being allowed to openly discuss the classification system, athletes who wanted a more robust system simply got

experienced first hand the idiosyncrasies of a classification policy that in my grouping has been developed over a number of years, and is still not always "fair".

Contrary to what some of the media has said, I have no issue with the "eliteness" of many of the athletes; to me, it is more of a debate about how we protect, encourage and support people from minority groups in the UK, and how we allow them to compete in the best environment for them. For many this is the mainstream, and for some it is not. I could never compete with a runner and they wouldn't want it, because from the 800m to the marathon I could beat them all.

The whole reason that there has to be disability governing bodies is because the mainstream did not want to develop sport for disabled people and, although this is slowly changing, there is still a long way to go.

'Athletes were given a glimpse of the Paralympics and it has been taken away from them'

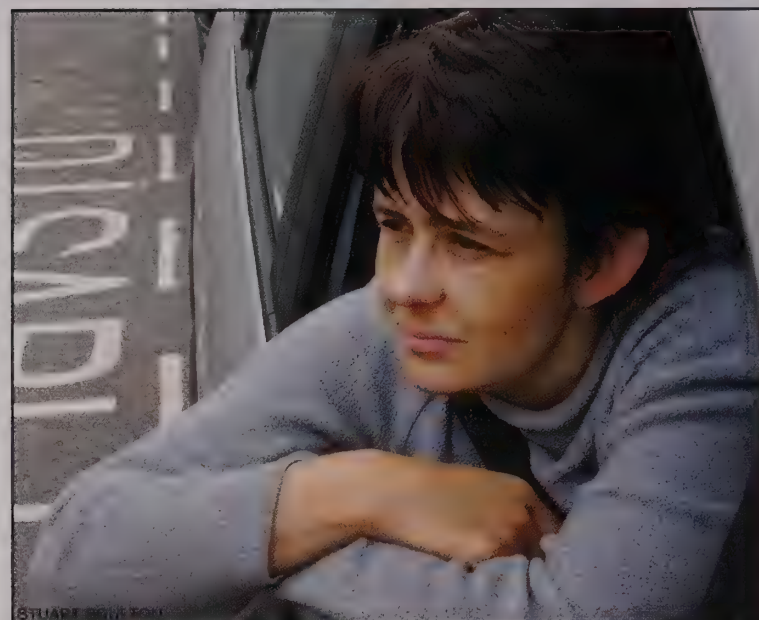
indeed to decide whether someone has the right level of disability, is not yet robust enough, and the appeal procedure needs further work.

All this goes back to the early 1990s. In 1992, while the Paralympics were held in Barcelona, LD athletes competed in Madrid and it was touted as the test event that would decide if integration could take place. Limited

accused of discriminating against LD athletes.

In 2000, the case for inclusion was blown wide open when it was discovered that the Spanish gold medal winning basketball team included people that didn't have a learning disability at all.

Admittedly, I was one of the athletes who had concerns about the eligibility system, not least because I have



LD athletes were given a glimpse of the Paralympics and it has been taken away from them. Instead of people rushing and pushing for inclusion, longer testing should have taken place to avoid this disappointment.

Those who will suffer are the athletes. If they were in a position to be selected (i.e. top four or so in the world), their lottery funding will be in jeopardy now there is no longer a Paralympics

programme for them.

The other question is where they will compete now. A group of individuals who have arguably more opportunity than most to compete in mainstream sport is still excluded because of prejudice.

There is no doubt that the debate will continue. I do hope someone out there remembers what all this is being done for – because without athletes there wouldn't be any sport at all.

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Letters to the Editor

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6 Market Road, London N7 9PW,
minicom: 020 7619 7332,
fax: 020 7619 7331,
e-mail: editor@disabilitynow.org.uk



Recognise this sign?

There is a sign that is replacing "Guide dogs only" (*DN*, March), see right.



It is distributed by Assistance Dogs (UK), an umbrella organisation for all five of the assistance dogs charities (Guide Dogs, Hearing Dogs, Dogs for the Disabled, Support Dogs and Canine Partners), set up to promote the equal rights of access for all assistance dogs. The sign is overseen by Hearing Dogs for the Deaf (tel: 01844 348100).

The problem is getting national recognition. Assistance Dogs (UK) does not have the funds to do this, so any help would be very welcome from access groups and printers or signmakers nationally.
Richard Wallace
Birmingham

Voluntary euthanasia

I refer to the report of the DRC debate which took place on 20 January 2003 on the right to be able to choose help to die (*DN*, March). In it you stated I welcomed the news that Reginald Crew, who was terminally ill from motor neurone disease, had been helped to die in Switzerland. This is not correct. Far from welcoming this, I made it clear I was very concerned at the development of "death tourism".

Although Mr Crew did receive hospice care, I understand he felt it was not for him. With only months left to live, he decided he did not want to endure the final stages of the disease. He wanted to die at a time of his own choosing and that meant, because of his illness, he needed help to achieve his desired aim. Faced with a law which makes any such assistance a crime, with a penalty of 14 years imprisonment, he chose to travel to Switzerland – something the Voluntary

Euthanasia Society (VES) never advocates or assists in.

Forcing terminally ill people who are already in a great deal of pain and distress to travel overseas to obtain help to die is inhumane. It is also dangerous, because such help is not provided by a doctor and neither are all the other options, such as palliative care, explored.

While VES understands why people like Mr Crew who was suffering unbearably from an incurable illness might wish to travel to Switzerland for help to die, we believe that such help should only be provided within very strict safeguards to ensure that everyone, including vulnerable people, are protected. That is why VES supports Lord Joffe's Patient (Assisted Dying) Bill, which is being considered in the House of Lords, but does not support so-called "death tourism".

Deborah Annetts
VES Chief Executive
London W8

Insurance companies won't pay

Britannia Airlines says that "we" should get our chairs insured (Airlines' excuses, *DN*, March). Yet insurance companies say they will not cover wheelchair damage caused whilst in the care of airlines.

The airline I had problems with was American Airlines, which refused point blank to pay the repair of my chair after they broke it on the way out. I had to pay that myself and I did not have it for the entire time I was in Las Vegas.

On the way home, I collected the chair and, after boarding the plane, had to sit and watch the baggage loaders smash it beyond use.

In London, I called the customer services manager for American Airlines, who told me they were not liable for any damage to my chair and my insurance company would pay. The repairs cost £1,400. I took the airline to court in Los Angeles and was awarded \$14,000. American Airlines have not paid and the court has added \$6,000 to the compensation.

I fly with British Airways to America and have never had any problems. I do make sure they know they are liable for any damage to the chairs and maybe this has some effect on how they handle mine.

Richard G Dutton
London SE27

Teen spirit



by Luke Jackson

I'm Luke Jackson. I'm 14 years old and I have Asperger's Syndrome (AS).

I suppose I should now give a simple and accurate description of what AS is...the only trouble is, nothing is ever that simple!

Although there are defining criteria that professionals use when assessing people, not everyone fits neatly into these little boxes. You see we are not clones, just people like anyone else. Not freaks, nor geeks, just people with different genes and personalities.

As part of the autism family, AS people have difficulties (I prefer to say differences) in communication, imagination and social interaction. Also many of us have specialist subjects or "obsessions". Other people may consider me and others with AS disabled in some way, but to me AS is a gift. I am very proud to be who I am.

This is where life often gets difficult. Many people, particularly at school, do not tolerate difference. I have no desire to hang around in packs and act like a sheep, all behaving the same way regardless of how stupid that may be. But it seems that that is what is expected of teenagers.

Words like "freak" and "geek" (and lots more that just could not be printed here) are some of the delightfully descriptive and imaginative words that other kids use to describe me. It seems that anyone who is different is automatically the subject of ridicule and bullying. Throughout my school life I have been bullied and although things are better to some extent now, this never really stops.

School is a hard place for an AS kid. There seem to be so many hidden rules and agendas and I struggle to work them out...thank God for IT rooms!

All I can say is, if you are a kid with AS, or a parent or carer of one for that matter, then remember that "different is cool".

Luke's book, Freaks, Geeks & Asperger Syndrome, £12.95, is published by Jessica Kingsley.

Parking abuse control in South Africa

I have just spent a month in South Africa where people who park in a disabled parking bay without a badge are clamped and have to pay a fine of 50 rand (£3.83). This is passed on to a charity of the stores or the shopping centre's charity of the year.

I took my blue badge with me as a I'm a wheelchair user, and it was accepted wherever I went with my family.
Jo Evans, email

Service is 'first class' at Stansted

About "Service scandal" (*DN*, March), my husband and I have travelled many times from Stansted airport with my wheelchair and we have had first class service with airport assistance. They can't do enough for us. We book with Thomson.

We have had trouble coming home, but Stansted has always had a porter there for us.

We did have trouble when we went with another airline.
C Scott, Norfolk

Medical assessment: we need a new system

I was saddened but not at all surprised by your article (*DN*, March) detailing the continuing problems suffered by many disabled people examined by medical practitioners after claiming Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

The much-touted efficiency boost that was to be injected by privatising the Benefits Agency Medical Services didn't appear, and the same combination of good doctors, shoddy moneygrubbers and poor-quality medicos continued to carry out assessments.

My own experiences have taught me several lessons:

- * Keep copies of all correspondence, including your original claim
- * Remember, if you are sent an appointment with a doctor who has examined you previously, you can ring your local Medical Services department and demand an alternative
- * Bear in mind that you are entitled to inform the doctor *before* your assessment that you will be reading through the entire form before signing it, and that if you sign it without doing so, you'd be illegally signing a legal document.

The complaints system is a joke. One GP in the town I used to live in had a sideline doing DLA assessments. At least a dozen others, besides me, made complaints about his demeanour and inaccuracy seven years ago, but he's still doing DLA assessments.

Nothing will change until doctors are directly employed by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), contractually obliged not to take on outside work, and are not forced to assess patients during a ten minute consultation. Such a system would be more expensive to get started, but the DWP would soon recoup its costs through savings on re-examinations and appeals.
Andy Plant, email

PC pulse

by Dan Batten

Acting up
Hollywood actress Sandra Bullock won't have endeared herself to any of her disabled fans with her recent comments in an inter-



view with *Esquire* magazine.

Talking about her personal life and quest to find a partner, Ms Bullock, star of films, including *While You Were Sleeping*, made a bizarre statement in which she said that Mr Right would have to be "ok with me being the spaz that I am". Quite clearly, her brain was napping when she opened her mouth.

TV



With BAFTAs, Golden Globes, SAGs and Oscars a-go-go, it's time for some awards here at DN.

First up is ITV1's fabulously tacky *Footballers Wives*. Quote of the Month goes to Jason, team-captain and father to hermaphrodite Paddy (but-not-the-sharpest-knife-in-the-drawer): "I had a son. Now I've got something that belongs in a doctor's pickle jar".

We accepted that C4's *The Book Group* featured a non-disabled actor playing the part of gorgeous, hunky, wheelchair-using babe-magnet Kenny. The "Trophy Shag" award was given by Kenny himself to the poor, hapless Harriet, his now-ex-girlfriend.

The award for the worst abuse of a disabled parking badge goes to cabbage-patch-doll lookalike and all round nasty piece of work Peter Foster. In BBC1's *The Conman, His Lover and the Prime Minister's Wife*, we saw the fraudster extraordinaire excel himself by using a disabled parking permit with impunity. Obviously he has no shame – to say nothing of his lover or the PM's wife.

The DN Legless Award goes jointly to Heather Mills McCartney for managing those tricky Parkinson stairs without going base over apex, and to Oz comic Adam Hills who flashed his prosthesis on BBC2's *Live Floor Show*, then topped this by handing it (for no good reason) to host Mark Lamarr on *Never Mind The Buzzcocks*.

I've tried opera but it just doesn't bake my biscuit I'm afraid. I was moved, though, by the gritty performance of Denise, the visually impaired woman who jointly won C4's *Operatunity* and went on to share the role of Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto*. It's all Greek to me, but the girl did good.

Finally, Gareth Gates may have been the runner up in BBC1's *Pop Idol* but where is Will Young these days? GG is all over us like a rash and even popped up on ITV1's *Tonight with Trevor McDonald: Singing Through My Stammer*.

Now he bakes my biscuit.

Jane Shepherd

Theatre



Diary of an Action Man



Ten-year-old Ezra's life is turned upside down when he discovers the real reason for his father's absence is not because he died a war hero, but because he'd fallen out with Ezra's mum.

The collision between Ezra's fantasy life, where his time is occupied re-enacting his father's dangerous missions and the real mission he embarks upon to find his father, is the subject for this compelling new play by Mike Kenny for seven to 11-year-olds.

The co-production by Graeae and the Unicorn Children's Theatre features four strong performances from a versatile company led by the superb Amit Sharma as Ezra.

Sign language and audio description are woven into the piece in a way that adds not just accessibility but also style and theatrical flair. The production is further enhanced by a striking set design courtesy of Lisa Ducie.

Diary of an Action Man is as enjoyable for adults as it is for kids and Jenny Sealey's skillful production is a good advert for how truly integrated casting makes for great theatre.

Ewan Marshall

Film

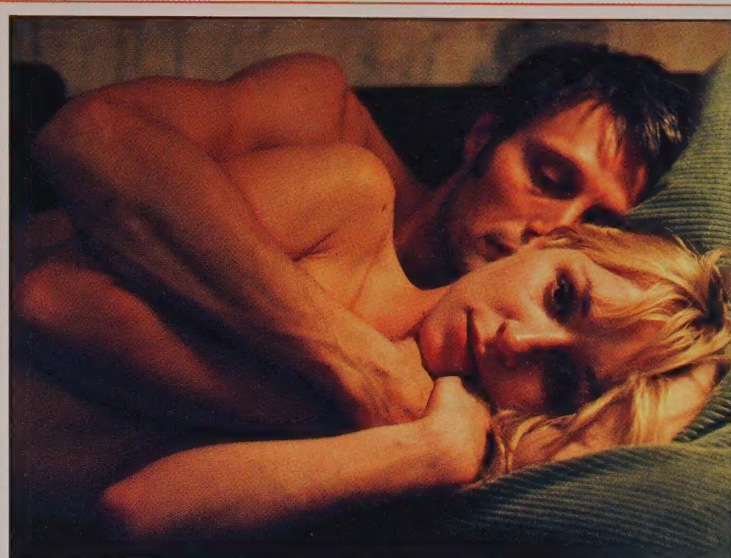


Open Hearts



Susanne Bier's *Open Hearts* concerns a young couple, Cecilie (Sonja Richter) and Joachim (Nikolaj Lie Kaas). They are engaged to be married when Joachim is hit by a car driven by Marie (Paprika Steens). Next thing we know, Joachim is a discontented quadriplegic, up and about in a wheelchair at a speed which is a remarkable testimony to Scandinavian health provision, while Cecilie falls for Marie's husband Niels (Mads Mikkelsen), who, conveniently, works in the hospital.

The film is made under the ten Dogme rules (the eleventh of which seems to be "the film must involve disability"). Never having seen a Dogme film, I was excited by the prospect, but *Open Hearts* is not a good advertisement. It sidesteps Dogme's "Vows of Chastity" too often to seem



entirely comfortable with them (a difficulty experienced by many who have taken vows of chastity). But it obeys the stipulations on using natural light, thus producing a visually murky and lifeless film.

The biggest problem is that the film is banal. Stories like this – life-changing events, social transgression and their emotional effects – are soap territory but soaps do them a lot better, partly because they are able to draw them out, taking months to build to a

climactic episode, but also because they are more sharply written and acted.

The film doesn't really get inside its characters' heads at all. Why are Cecilie and Niels drawn to each other? Why does Niels leave his wife and young family? We are not told.

As for Joachim, the film makes some feeble efforts, but leaves him right out of the major story. Once disabled, he's not really a character at all, just an encumbrance.

Allan Sutherland

Coming up



Connection, a touring exhibition of new work by disabled artists in Wales, appears at the Pontardawe Arts Centre from 24 March-18 April. Contact Arts Disability Wales, tel. & Minicom: 029 2055 1040, www.artsdisabilitywales.com



Chickenshed Theatre Company presents a new musical, *Love of Seven Dolls*. In the circus world of Paris, a young girl's life becomes inextricably bound with a troupe of seven puppets and their cruel master. 2-6 and 9-13 April at 7.30pm. Box office: 020 8292 9222, www.chickenshed.org.uk



The High Spin dance theatre company, featuring performers with learning disabilities, continues its tour of *An Electric Bouquet*. Dates include 10 April at The Phoenix, Leicester (1 pm, tel. 0116 255 4854) and 23 April at the Junction, Cambridge (8pm, tel. 01223 511 511). www.highspin.org.uk

Final call for photos!



Freedom in Focus 2003 has only a few weeks left to run before the closing date on 30 April. So if you would like to get your hands on £500 in cash, a camera, £200 towards a photography course of your choice or a trip on the London Eye, don't delay, get snapping today!

The categories are nature and modern life and it is up to you to interpret these themes in any way you choose. Our judges will be looking for creativity and personal expression so there is plenty of opportunity to use your imagination. Winners and runners-up will be chosen for each category, with two age groups each (18 and over and under 18).



2002 Winner Ray Healey

For full details and an entry form, call 020 7619 7317 or visit www.disabilitynow.org.uk



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Starting blocks

In the final part of *DN's* early years feature, John Pring finds out about the services offered to disabled pre-school children

Parents can find it hard to get a diagnosis of their child's disability. But it can be even harder to find the right services to help them through the early years.

Unfortunately, the quality of education, social care and health support available often depends on where a family lives.

Francine Bates, chief executive of Contact A Family (CAF), believes a key issue in determining the level of provision in a particular area is

such as speech and language therapy, behaviour management and physiotherapy.

Bates says: "Children with the highest level of needs are prioritised, but it means children with a less high level of needs may wait much longer.

"In some areas, the services are very good. Other areas are less good. Nationally, there is a shortage of these particular types of therapists, specifically trained to work with children."

Many families also find it

disability charity Mencap, believes there are some "really quite exciting" pilot projects providing early years services, including the Early Support Pilot Programme (ESPP).

But she adds: "There are some areas where families get a Rolls-Royce service. In other areas, hardly anybody is getting an effective early years service."

Ironically, one common problem can be that parents are bombarded with offers of different services.

"Parents need to just step back a minute and think through with their family what sort of services they really want," says Campbell.

The Department for Education and Skills (DFES) says it has created a larger and more flexible budget for local authorities to help develop longer-term strategies for disabled and other children.

It also points to its ESPP, which aims to improve services for disabled children under two and improve co-ordination of support for families.

A DFES spokeswoman also pointed to schemes such as Sure Start, which now includes guidance on working with families with disabled children, Neighbourhood Nurseries and Early Excellence Centres. All these schemes are supposed to be "inclusive and readily accessible".

The spokeswoman says early years disabled children will benefit from "record increases in funding for education", including large increases for early years children with special educational needs, and £1m to



Annemarie Derby, from Belfast, told *DN* about the problems she faced getting an early diagnosis of deafness for her first profoundly deaf daughter, Orla.

She found that having her second daughter Aimee diagnosed at two weeks made it much easier to help her learn than Orla, who was 18 months when diagnosed.

Annemarie says the earlier diagnosis has helped secure much better services for Aimee, who is now 15 months old.

A teacher visits once a week, and a speech therapist once a month.

"It is very important to be known by the various bodies that can give you information," says Annemarie.

Aimee has probably been lucky with speech therapy because she has been visiting a cochlear implant centre. Other parents wait up to six months for a speech therapy assessment, says Annemarie.

Having the services they need "makes all the difference". "I can go to bed at night and know that we are on the right road."

improve early intervention and support through ESPP.

With some conditions, healthcare is the biggest issue. But here, too, provision seems to depend on where you live.

Lucy Twitchin, of the National Asthma Campaign (NAC), says there is a wide discrepancy in provision for small children with asthma.

In an NAC survey, one in five parents said they had had sub-standard care from their GP.

Bates is chairing a committee looking at the needs of disabled children that is set to report to ministers in May,

as part of the development of a national service framework.

"The key message for us is the need for agencies to work together to ensure that they meet the needs of families and disabled children," she says.

Bates says agencies and the government need to make these families a spending priority.

But she adds: "Many of the problems families experience have less to do with resources and more to do with the fact that they do not feel listened to, or they feel the services they do receive are badly coordinated and inefficiently run."

'The key message is the need for agencies to work together'

how closely the different agencies supplying those services work together.

Dr Philippa Russell, director of the Council for Disabled Children, agrees: "It is a massive problem, and it is more complex when you have a range of very small providers."

Russell says the system can work better when services are mainly provided by local authorities.

Often, the parents who find it hardest to access the right services are those whose children have lower levels of need, particularly when it comes to accessing specialist therapies,

difficult to get pre-school places. This may be because the nursery or playgroup is inaccessible, unaffordable or reluctant to take a disabled child.

"There is a danger that, from very early on, disabled children will be denied the experience of play and leisure and mixing with children their own age," says Bates. "That is one of the reasons why CAF and other organisations are lobbying government very strongly to ensure parents and children can access childcare more readily."

Lesley Campbell, national children's officer for learning

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Amy Carrigan's daughter Robin first began getting symptoms of asthma when she was six months old, but it wasn't until she was ten months old that she was finally diagnosed.

"The doctors were pretty useless," says Amy, from Burnham, Buckinghamshire. "We had to see four doctors until they finally said yes, it was probably asthma. I was then just sent away with a couple of inhalers and left to get on with it."

Amy found out by accident that her GP ran an asthma clinic.

The only other source of support is the National Asthma Campaign's helpline, which has "really impressed" her.

But it isn't matched by services outside the voluntary sector. "I do not think there is enough practical support," she says.

She often has to take Robin, now three, to hospital. But they often fail to take her daughter's problems as seriously as Amy would like. "There isn't that much support. They said there were loads of children coming there every day with asthma."

Cerebral palsy helpline, tel: 0808 800 3333.

Contact A Family helpline, tel: 0808 808 3555.

Mencap Learning Disability helpline, tel: 0808 808 1111. Mencap has an early years services factsheet. Or visit www.mencap.org.uk

The **National Asthma Campaign's** helpline is on 08457 010203 or visit www.asthma.org.uk

The **National Deaf Children's Society's** free helpline is on 0808 800 8880 (voice and text, and has an interpreter service) or visit www.ndcs.org.uk

Every **local authority** has a children's information service.